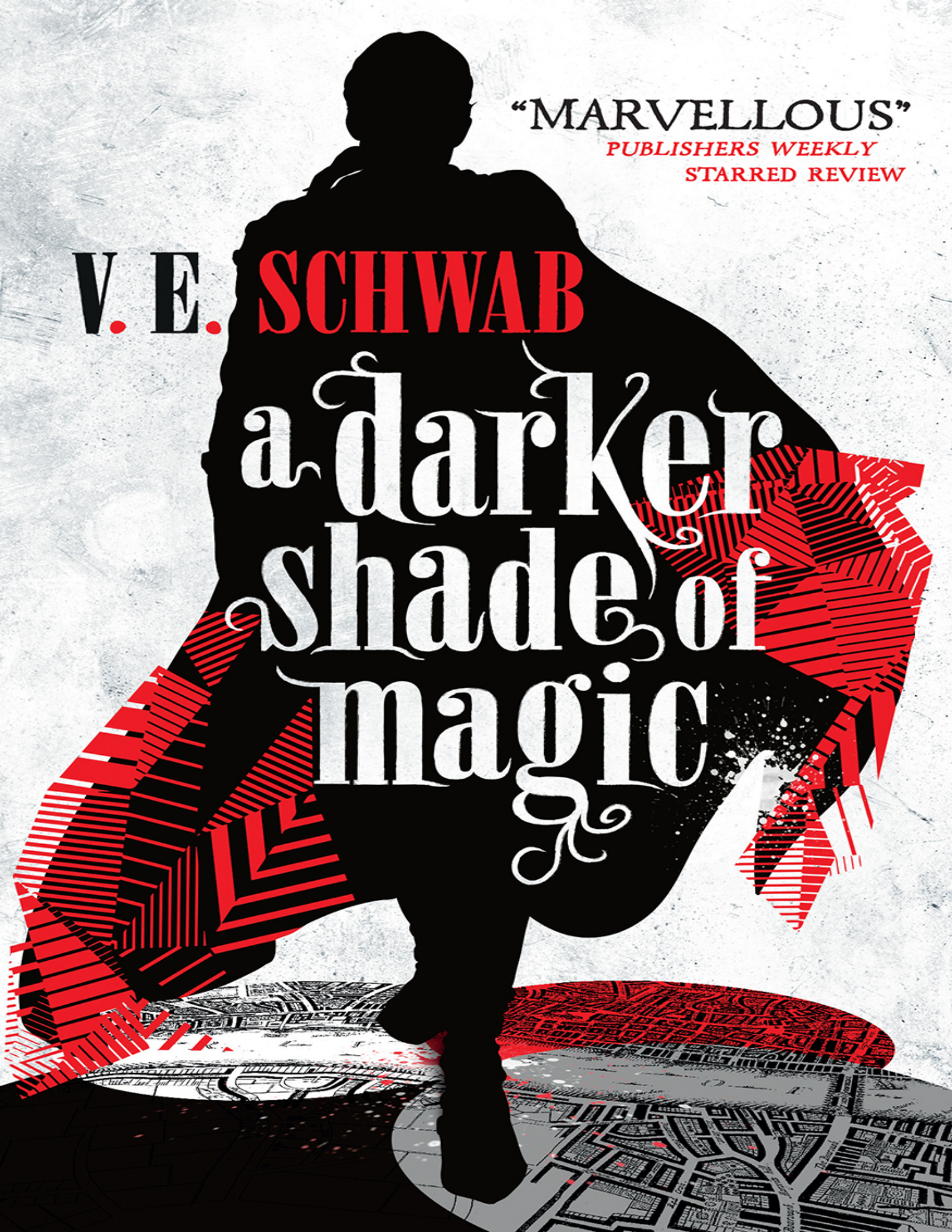


"MARVELLOUS"

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY  
STARRED REVIEW

V. E. SCHWAB

a darker  
shade of  
magic



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V. E. SCHWAB

a darker  
shade of  
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*For the ones who dream of stranger worlds*

*Sah is the quandary when it comes to magic, that it is not an issue of strength but of balance. For too little power, and we become weak. Too much, and we become something else entirely.*

TIEREN SERENSE,  
head priest of the London Sanctuary

I

THE TRAVELER

# I

Kell wore a very peculiar coat.

It had neither one side, which would be conventional, nor two, which would be unexpected, but *several*, which was, of course, impossible.

The first thing he did whenever he stepped out of one London and into another was take off the coat and turn it inside out once or twice (or even three times) until he found the side he needed. Not *all* of them were fashionable, but they each served a purpose. There were ones that blended in and ones that stood out, and one that served no purpose but of which he was just particularly fond.

So when Kell passed through the palace wall and into the anteroom, he took a moment to steady himself—it took its toll, moving between worlds—and then shrugged out of his red, high-collared coat and turned it inside out from right to left so that it became a simple black jacket. Well, a simple black jacket elegantly lined with silver thread and adorned with two gleaming columns of silver buttons. Just because he adopted a more modest palette when he was abroad (wishing neither to offend the local royalty nor to draw attention) didn't mean he had to sacrifice style.

*Oh, kings*, thought Kell as he fastened the buttons on the coat. He was starting to think like Rhy.

On the wall behind him, he could just make out the ghosted symbol made by his passage. Like a footprint in sand, already fading.

He'd never bothered to mark the door from *this* side, simply because he never went back this way. Windsor's distance from London was terribly inconvenient considering the fact that, when traveling between worlds, Kell could only move between a place in one and the same *exact* place in another. Which was a problem because there was no Windsor Castle a day's journey from *Red* London. In fact, Kell had just come through the stone

wall of a courtyard belonging to a wealthy gentleman in a town called Disan. Disan was, on the whole, a very pleasant place.

Windsor was not.

Impressive, to be sure. But not pleasant.

A marble counter ran against the wall, and on it a basin of water waited for him, as it always did. He rinsed his bloody hand, as well as the silver crown he'd used for passage, then slipped the cord it hung on over his head, and tucked the coin back beneath his collar. In the hall beyond, he could hear the shuffle of feet, the low murmur of servants and guards. He'd chosen the anteroom specifically to avoid them. He knew very well how little the Prince Regent liked him being here, and the last thing Kell wanted was an audience, a cluster of ears and eyes and mouths reporting the details of his visit back to the throne.

Above the counter and the basin hung a mirror in a gilded frame, and Kell checked his reflection quickly—his hair, a reddish brown, swept down across one eye, and he did not fix it, though he did take a moment to smooth the shoulders of his coat—before passing through a set of doors to meet his host.

The room was stiflingly warm—the windows latched despite what looked like a lovely October day—and a fire raged oppressively in the hearth.

George III sat beside it, a robe dwarfing his withered frame and a tea tray untouched before his knees. When Kell came in, the king gripped the edges of his chair.

“Who’s there?” he called out without turning. “Robbers? Ghosts?”

“I don’t believe ghosts would answer, Your Majesty,” said Kell, announcing himself.

The ailing king broke into a rotting grin. “Master Kell,” he said. “You’ve kept me waiting.”

“No more than a month,” he said, stepping forward.

King George squinted his blind eyes. “It’s been longer, I’m sure.”

“I promise, it hasn’t.”

“Maybe not for *you*,” said the king. “But time isn’t the same for the mad and the blind.”

Kell smiled. The king was in good form today. It wasn’t always so. He was never sure what state he’d find his majesty in. Perhaps it had seemed

like more than a month because the last time Kell visited, the king had been in one of his moods, and Kell had barely been able to calm his fraying nerves long enough to deliver his message.

“Maybe it’s the year that has changed,” continued the king, “and not the month.”

“Ah, but the year is the same.”

“And what year is that?”

Kell’s brow furrowed. “Eighteen nineteen,” he said.

A cloud passed across King George’s face, and then he simply shook his head and said, “Time,” as if that one word could be to blame for everything. “Sit, sit,” he added, gesturing at the room. “There must be another chair here somewhere.”

There wasn’t. The room was shockingly sparse, and Kell was certain the doors in the hall were locked and unlocked from without, not within.

The king held out a gnarled hand. They’d taken away his rings, to keep him from hurting himself, and his nails were cut to nothing.

“My letter,” he said, and for an instant Kell saw a glimmer of George as he once was. Regal.

Kell patted the pockets of his coat and realized he’d forgotten to take the notes out before changing. He shrugged out of the jacket and returned it for a moment to its red self, digging through its folds until he found the envelope. When he pressed it into the king’s hand, the latter fondled it and caressed the wax seal—the red throne’s emblem, a chalice with a rising sun—then brought the paper to his nose and inhaled.

“Roses,” he said wistfully.

He meant the magic. Kell never noticed the faint aromatic scent of Red London clinging to his clothes, but whenever he traveled, someone invariably told him that he smelled like freshly cut flowers. Some said tulips. Others stargazers. Chrysanthemums. Peonies. To the king of England, it was always roses. Kell was glad to know it was a pleasant scent, even if he couldn’t smell it. He could smell Grey London (smoke) and White London (blood), but to him, Red London simply smelled like home.

“Open it for me,” instructed the king. “But don’t mar the seal.”

Kell did as he was told, and withdrew the contents. For once, he was grateful the king could no longer see, so he could not know how brief the



letter was. Three short lines. A courtesy paid to an ailing figurehead, but nothing more.

“It’s from my queen,” explained Kell.

The king nodded. “Go on,” he commanded, affecting a stately countenance that warred with his fragile form and his faltering voice. “*Go on.*”

Kell swallowed. ““Greetings to his majesty, King George III,” he read, ““from a neighboring throne.””

The queen did not refer to it as the *red* throne, or send greetings from *Red* London (even though the city was in fact quite crimson, thanks to the rich, pervasive light of the river), because she did not think of it that way. To her, and to everyone else who inhabited only one London, there was little need to differentiate among them. When the rulers of one conversed with those of another, they simply called them *others*, or *neighbors*, or on occasion (and particularly in regard to White London) less flattering terms.

Only those few who could move among the Londons needed a way to keep them straight. And so Kell—inspired by the lost city known to all as Black London—had given each remaining capital a color.

Grey for the magic-less city.

Red, for the healthy empire.

White, for the starving world.

In truth, the cities themselves bore little resemblance to one another (and the countries around and beyond bore even less). The fact they were all called *London* was its own mystery, though the prevailing theory was that one of the cities had taken the name long ago, before the doors were all sealed and the only things allowed through were letters between kings and queens. As to which city had first laid claim to the name, none could agree.

““We hope to learn that you are well,”” continued the queen’s letter, ““and that the season is as fair in your city as it is in ours.””

Kell paused. There was nothing more, save a signature. King George wrung his hands.

“Is that all it says?” he asked.

Kell hesitated. “No,” he said, folding the letter. “That’s only the beginning.”

He cleared his throat and began to pace as he pulled his thoughts together and put them into the queen’s voice. “Thank you for asking after our family,

she says. The King and I are well. Prince Rhy, on the other hand, continues to impress and infuriate in equal measure, but has at least gone the month without breaking his neck or taking an unsuitable bride. Thanks be to Kell alone for keeping him from doing either, or both.”

Kell had every intention of letting the queen linger on his own merits, but just then the clock on the wall chimed five, and Kell swore under his breath. He was running late.

“Until my next letter,” he finished hurriedly, “stay happy and stay well. With fondness. Her Highness Emira, Queen of Arnes.”

Kell waited for the king to say something, but his blind eyes had a steady, faraway look, and Kell feared he had lost him. He set the folded note on the tea tray and was halfway to the wall when the king spoke up.

“I don’t have a letter for her,” he murmured.

“That’s all right,” said Kell softly. The king hadn’t been able to write one for years. Some months he tried, dragging the quill haphazardly across the parchment, and some months he insisted on having Kell transcribe, but most months he simply told Kell the message and Kell promised to remember.

“You see, I didn’t have the time,” added the king, trying to salvage a vestige of his dignity. Kell let him have it.

“I understand,” he said. “I’ll give the royal family your regards.”

Kell turned again to go, and again the old king called out to stop him.

“Wait, wait,” he said. “Come back.”

Kell paused. His eyes went to the clock. Late, and getting later. He pictured the Prince Regent sitting at his table in St. James, gripping his chair and quietly stewing. The thought made Kell smile, so he turned back toward the king as the latter pulled something from his robe with fumbling fingers.

It was a coin.

“It’s fading,” said the king, cupping the metal in his weathered hands as if it were precious and fragile. “I can’t feel the magic anymore. Can’t smell it.”

“A coin is a coin, Your Majesty.”

“Not so and you know it,” grumbled the old king. “Turn out your pockets.”

Kell sighed. “You’ll get me in trouble.”

“Come, come,” said the king. “Our little secret.”

Kell dug his hand into his pocket. The first time he had visited the king of England, he’d given him a coin as proof of who he was and where he came from. The story of the other Londons was entrusted to the crown and handed down heir to heir, but it had been years since a traveler had come. King George had taken one look at the sliver of a boy and squinted and held out his meaty hand, and Kell had set the coin in his palm. It was a simple lin, much like a grey shilling, only marked with a red star instead of a royal face. The king closed his fist over the coin and brought it to his nose, inhaling its scent. And then he’d smiled, and tucked the coin into his coat, and welcomed Kell inside.

From that day on, every time Kell paid his visit, the king would insist the magic had worn off the coin, and make him trade it for another, one new and pocket-warm. Every time Kell would say it was forbidden (it was, expressly), and every time the king would insist that it could be their little secret, and Kell would sigh and fetch a fresh bit of metal from his coat.

Now he plucked the old lin out of the king’s palm and replaced it with a new one, folding George’s gnarled fingers gently over it.

“Yes, yes,” cooed the ailing king to the coin in his palm.

“Take care,” said Kell as he turned to go.

“Yes, yes,” said the king, his focus fading until he was lost to the world, and to his guest.

Curtains gathered in the corner of the room, and Kell pulled the heavy material aside to reveal a mark on the patterned wallpaper. A simple circle, bisected by a line, drawn in blood a month ago. On another wall in another room in another palace, the same mark stood. They were as handles on opposite sides of the same door.

Kell’s blood, when paired with the token, allowed him to move *between* the worlds. He needn’t specify a place because wherever he was, that’s where he’d be. But to make a door *within* a world, both sides had to be marked by the same exact symbol. Close wasn’t close enough. Kell had learned that the hard way.

The symbol on the wall was still clear from his last visit, the edges only slightly smeared, but it didn’t matter. It had to be redone.

He rolled up his sleeve and freed the knife he kept strapped to the inside of his forearm. It was a lovely thing, that knife, a work of art, silver from tip

to hilt and monogrammed with the letters *K* and *L*.

The only relic from another life.

A life he didn't know. Or at least, didn't remember.

Kell brought the blade to the back of his forearm. He'd already carved one line today, for the door that brought him this far. Now he carved a second. His blood, a rich ruby red, welled up and over, and he returned the knife to its sheath and touched his fingers to the cut and then to the wall, redrawing the circle and the line that ran through it. Kell guided his sleeve down over the wound—he'd treat all the cuts once he was home—and cast a last glance back at the babbling king before pressing his palm flat to the mark on the wall.

It hummed with magic.

*"As Tascen,"* he said. *Transfer.*

The patterned paper rippled and softened and gave way under his touch, and Kell stepped forward and through.